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Colleges Increase Efforts to Measure What Students Learn, Survey Finds

By DAVID GLENN

Colleges appear to be doing more to assess student learning, according to a report scheduled for release today by the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

The report, which is based on a survey of academic officers at 433 of the association's member institutions, says that 78 percent of those institutions have established common learning goals for all of their undergraduates, and that 72 percent try to assess learning outcomes across the curriculum. The learning goals mentioned in the survey include both subject-specific knowledge in science and the humanities, and general skills like critical reasoning and oral communication.

But the report also suggests that many college leaders are worried that their students do not know about the learning outcomes they are supposed to achieve. And—in a discovery that will cheer some education advocates and dismay others—the survey found that relatively few colleges are using external learning assessments that might allow institutions to compare their performance with that of their peers.

The survey was developed in parallel with a project that the association calls "Liberal Education and America's Promise," which promotes the value of the traditional liberal-arts framework, as distinct from narrowly vocational college programs.

One theme of that project is that colleges should tie student-learning assessment to their own curricula rather than anchor their assessments to national standardized tests. That approach would allow colleges to maintain their particular identities, and would also allow student learning to be organically nurtured within academic departments, said the association's president, Carol Geary Schneider, in an interview last week.

"Overwhelmingly our institutions are going in a direction that allows them to assess the quality of their students' performance against the expectations of their own curriculum," Ms. Schneider said.

She cited especially the growing number of institutions using electronic portfolios, which allow students to demonstrate mastery of particular skills. (In the survey, 57 percent of colleges reported using electronic portfolios, and 32 percent said they use such portfolios to assess learning.)

Assessing the Assessments

Such highly particularized learning assessments have sometimes been criticized as inadequate. In recent years, some education advocates have argued that whatever the merits of colleges' internal assessment systems, they should also find ways to compare their students' learning with that of

their peers. (That argument comes in several flavors, but one version is associated with Kevin Carey, a policy analyst and *Chronicle columnist.*)

In the new report, only 26 percent of institutions reported that they used standardized national tests of general skills, and only 16 percent reported that they used standardized national tests of general knowledge. Those figures may be artificially low, however, because of the way the survey was designed. The only institutions that were asked explicitly about whether they used standardized national assessments were those answering yes to a previous question about whether they "assess cumulative learning outcomes in general education across multiple courses." Fifty-two percent of the respondents did so. Among the 48 percent that answered no, it is likely that some used standardized national assessments, even though this group was not asked about them.

In an e-mail message to *The Chronicle* on Monday, Richard J. Shavelson, a professor of education at Stanford University and author of a forthcoming book on assessing student learning, said he was surprised that the association's survey did not place greater emphasis on colleges' use—or lack thereof—of external assessment tools.

"Learning assessment is incomplete when only internal formative assessment or only external summative assessment is used," Mr. Shavelson wrote. "Both are needed and need to be aligned with one another. Without this combination, campuses may be fooling themselves and their external constituencies as to the progress they are making in improving student learning." (Mr. Shavelson added, however, that he dislikes the idea of "publishing league tables" ranking colleges, as Mr. Carey and others have advocated.)

Ms. Schneider replied that she did not believe there was actually much distance between her association's position and Mr. Shavelson's. The college association has nothing against external assessments, she said—as long as they are closely married to learning goals that faculty members themselves have defined.

"The survey shows why colleges and universities have been so resistant to the use of a single test to report 'value added' from college," Ms. Schneider said. "With so much going on at the departmental level to define goals and assess students' cumulative learning over time—including learning on general outcomes such as writing or critical thinking—faculty rightly observe that a single test cannot provide much insight into what's going right or wrong in specific fields."

One disheartening element of the new report, in Ms. Schneider's view, is that few respondents said they believed that their students knew about and understood their institution's learning goals. Among colleges that have established a common set of learning goals for all undergraduates, just 5 percent of respondents said they believed that "almost all" students knew about and understood those goals, and only 37 percent said a majority of their students understood the goals.

"We don't want these goals to go the way of New Year's resolutions, carefully thought through but never actually achieved," Ms. Schneider said. "If we want students to achieve these goals,

then they need to understand what's expected, and how their courses might help them achieve the kind of real-world competencies that we want from a college education."